Who are Today's Polish Traitors? Of Politics of Paranoia and Resentment and Missed Lessons from the Past

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> *„Those who go around shouting „Poland, Poland!", don't always have the deepest and wisest reflections of Poland in their hearts and minds. – Slowacki knew this. (…). The symbols of tradition and history are alive to our nation, and it has never allowed them to be torn from its memory. But the question is whether these symbols incline us to communal action and true patriotic sentiments, or whether they engender sterile inert emotions and cheap feelings, serving as a smokescreen for self-satisfaction, arrogance and apathy, indeed chauvinism and even hatred."*

Andrzej Wajda

Who did more to bring down Communism than Lech Walesa? Mikhail Gorbachev perhaps, or Vaclav Havel. Certainly John Paul II and Ronald Reagan. After that the list peters out pretty quickly. Yet now we read insinuations that Lech Walesa worked for the secret police of Communist Poland. Earlier this year officials of the Polish Institute of National Memory (IPN) seized documents from a vacation house of the deceased former secret police chief, Czesław Kiszczak. One file supposedly contains Walesa's signature, showing assent to act as a „secret collaborator," as well as alleged receipts for payments. This is not the first time that Walesa has faced questions. In the 1990s rumors surfaced that he was an informer code-named Bolek, yet no document has emerged showing that such an agent spied on anyone. The IPN is not even sure if Walesa's alleged signature is genuine. What is unquestionable is a stubborn campaign to show that a man who destroyed a political system was also in its pay. Walesa is not the only dissident icon to be targeted. Writers Adam Michnik and Jacek Kuron, former foreign minister Bronislaw Geremek, and first post-Communist Prime Minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki have likewise attracted accusations of complicity. In Germany or Czechoslovakia these would imply moral failing, in Poland they signal treason. That begs a question: are these examples unrelated incidents or rather do they hint at an emerging trend of looking at, and understanding, Polish history ?

The immediate source of the hunt for traitors is the conservative Law and Justice Party (PiS) which won elections in October last year. Its leader, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, was an intimate of Walesa until a falling out in 1992, and now portrays everything Poland's elite has done after that as spoiled by networks of agents. Walesa is supposedly the conspiracy's kingpin. One cannot fully grasp the rationale of the new Polish powers that be without lurking behind its ideology and founding myths. For PiS the birth of the Third Republic 1989 has been deficient since the very beginning. This party has been built and thrived on the premise of denouncing the so-called Round Table talks in 1989 as a rotten compromise struck by Lech Walesa („a traitor and secret collaborator with the communists") and by Solidarność with the outgoing communist regime and as a means of keeping the old elites alive. According to this narrative, Polish politics and democratic institutions (e.g. the Constitutional Court), are all sham, the Third Republic is not a real state but a phantom state built on the intellectual corruption of political elites, bribery, dysfunctional government caving in to Brussels and selling off Poland to strangers for peanuts and waiting at the beck and call of Germany. "Real Poles" are shackled and relegated to the sidelines. Now, "We the PiS" speaking on behalf of true Poles will reclaim the state from the corrupt elites and purge it of all irregularities: censorship, the antagonising rhetoric of "we vs. them", nationalistic undertones (Poland as German's and EU's political lapdog etc.), and manipulations of the law. In „Paranoia driven" politics, any pocket of independence and potential resistance, is seen as dangerous and fuels conspiracy theories. The enemy is omnipresent: everywhere and nowhere. It is invisible and does not respect rules. As a result, tracking the enemy and/or traitor is crucial and provides self-renewing justification for the paranoid

regime.

However, this is only part of the story. In order to fully understand the campaign's obsessions and skewed vision of history we have to delve into the deeper past. Readers of Poland's newspapers note the word „Targowica" associated with supposed malfeasants. Targowica was an eastern Polish town where rich landowners formed a confederation against the Polish Constitution of 1791 because it curtailed their privileges. The constitution's drafters had transformed a dysfunctional state run by nobles into a democracy of all citizens, but fearing the contagion of popular sovereignty the neighbouring monarchies of Prussia, Russia, and Austria invaded and wiped Poland from the map in 1795. Assisting them in a bloody military campaign were the „traitors" of Targowica. For the following century Poles looked upon this event with scrutiny and intense pain. As Ottoman and Habsburg imperial rule weakened, independent and semi-independent states emerged in Serbia in 1817, Greece in 1832, Italy and Romania in 1861, Germany in 1871, and Bulgaria in 1878. Hungary enjoyed de facto independence from 1867. Poles' fortunes went in the opposite direction. They stages armed rebellions in 1806, in 1830, 1846 and 1863, but the results were disastrous, successively reducing their liberties, especially in areas controlled by Russian and Prussia, where even the word Poland was suppressed and Poles were not permitted schooling in their language. Who was responsible? Because the guilt of tyrants in Berlin or St. Petersburg was taken for granted, attention focused on fellow Poles who incorporated the legacy of Targowica. With passing decades standards for patriotic behaviour became infinitely elastic, and ultimately no defense was accepted for failure to support national resistance with one's last measure of energy. An intellectual writing in 1863 spoke of „treason-mania" [zdradomania] on the part of fellow Poles.

In 1918 the imperial powers collapsed and Poland reemerged thanks to the political and military genius of Józef Pilsudski, a socialist nobleman from Lithuania. Yet soon accusations surfaced. Had Pilsudski not taken excessive risks in his battles in the east in 1920 against Leon Trotsky? Was he not in fact a traitor? Throughout the interwar years gigantic accusations were traded between Pilsudski's camp and the rival National Democrats, though differences between them in policy were slight. Both wanted a strong Poland and stood together against Hitler in 1939.

It's often thought that Nazi Germany attacked Poland as part of a long-standing plan of conquest. In fact, Hitler originally wanted to ally with Poland in a crusade against the USSR, but in the spring of 1939 Poland said no. Polish sovereignty was non-negotiable, and it would not survive an alliance with Nazi Germany. Britain's pledge to support Poland enraged Hitler and he launched a furious assault on September 1. Yet almost from the moment the Wehrmacht rolled over their armies, Poles conspired in underground formations, sometimes with weapons, but more often with note- and textbooks in hidden classrooms that replaced the schools the Germans had closed. Historians record little Polish collaboration in these years, yet charges of treason emerged nonetheless, for example against poet Czeslaw Milosz for merely questioning the decision to launch an uprising in Warsaw in August 1944 which cost 200,000 civilian lives, but gained nothing tangible. The later Nobel prize winner was told: no sacrifice for the nation is too great.

Soviet forces stood across the Vistula river and watched the Nazis obliterate Warsaw, but in the winter of 1945 they advanced to occupy the capital and rest of the country. Poland fell under Communist rule, yet Poles did more to resist than other East Europeans, above all by refusing to join the party and secret police (if there was one informant per 180 citizens in East Germany, there was one per 1,700 in Poland). The party adjusted to anticipated opposition by scaling back attacks on the free peasantry, the church and universities, all of which remained more independent than elsewhere.

The culmination of collective refusal was the trade Union Solidarity which counted 10 million members from all corners of Polish society. Its charismatic leader was the mustached electrician Walesa, who continued tireless work from the underground after General Wojciech Jaruzelski declared Martial Law in December 1981. During Gorbachev's perestroika Walesa handily outdebated a Communist politician on live TV and went on to preside over negotiations that prepared the transition from Communism in the summer of 1989. At this point neo-Stalinist rule continued unshaken in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Romania.

Such a history should fill Poles with pride, yet they draw upon the exacting standards from their own past rather than feel consolation by looking at other countries. Polish insistence upon native sovereignty assured that the

foreign implant of Communism remained weakly rooted, but also that limited involvement is viewed more harshly in retrospect than in places like Czechoslovakia or Romania where complicity was widespread. Perhaps the strangest idea in today's conservative critique is that even negotiating the end of Communism with Communists was an unacceptable act of betrayal. Right-wing websites feature pictures from the spring of 1989 of Walesa and Michnik at table, seemingly enjoying the company of Generals Kiszczak and Jaruzelski just before the latter exited the stage of history. The current head of the PiS parliamentary faction calls Jaruzelski a „Soviet general in Polish uniform," and the treason is supposedly evident. In Jaroslaw Kaczynski's mind all who worked in the Communist regime are congenitally unfit for any role in independent Poland though in fact that regime was moderate and surrendered power peacefully. He thus offers a perfectly totalitarian critique of what was an imperfectly totalitarian system. The same rationale of exclusion applies to anybody who opposes in the slightest his quest to put Poland back on the pedestal of history where it always belonged, and yet was allegedly denied such recognition and its rightful place. But much worse than this, his government's efforts to cleanse Polish politics of Communists quarter century after Communism's demise has led to purges of the judiciary and the media that threaten to silence opposition and institutionalise one-party rule. All this driven by „politics of paranoia".

The greatest threat to a nation was to lose a sense of responsibility for its own fate and to accept a mythology of unfreedom and victimhood. Who was responsible for Poland's sad state? To answer that question, Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski writing in 1973, went back to the late eighteenth century, yet he did not use the word Targowica. „The causes of Poland's fall", he wrote „actually lay in Polish institutions created by our nation". This was not, and is not in particular today, a popular point of view, but if the nation was a collective that exists through time, it has – Poles have – no choice but to own up to their own heritage. The past had created debts that the present owed to the future. This brings us to present day Poland. Those who know Poland's history know today's heirs of Targowica: they are those who forget this history while screaming „treason", who promise but never deliver revelations from secret police files, and attack independent judiciary while replacing critical journalists, wiping away separations of powers, limited government and, last but not least, disabling the Polish Constitutional Court. Poles hardly welcome outside advice in their current predicament because it seems to question their ability to manage their own affairs. But Poland's past holds all the lessons one needs. Targowica cost Poland independence, but it destroyed something even more precious: the boldest experiment in democracy in Central and Eastern Europe until 1918. Think of the mischief the continent would have been spared had rule of law and popular sovereignty flourished in a large and populous country bridging Germany and Russia from the 1790s onward. All the poisonous rhetoric in this region of democracy as a supposed „western" implant would have been unthinkable. The 1791 constitution determined „*Polishness*" not by ethnic belonging but by shared citizenship: think of the agony Europe might have been saved with a well-grounded regime of rights decades before anyone dreamed of making a nation state based on shared culture let alone „blood."

Given the EU's abdication of Polish cause today, Poles don't need the EU to tell them something is gravely wrong with today's regime: they can look into their own past and find that checks and balances, limited government as well as virtues of coming together and working for the common good – Poland, were all enshrined in a document ratified at Warsaw's Royal Castle on May 3, 1791 and animated the May Constitution's Founding Fathers. This tradition must now incline us to, using Andrzej Wajda's words, „*communal action and true patriotic sentiments*" while rejecting „*sterile and inert emotions and cheap feelings that serve as a smokescreen for self-satisfaction, arrogance and apathy, chauvinism and even hatred*„. Spreading all-too-easy „culture of treason" and using it as a tool to fight political adversaries, dividing Poles into „better" and „worse" sorts, and denigrating national symbols and heroes, all as part of the wicked politics of memory and resentment, are the last thing Poland needs today, and yet this politics seems to engulf Poland at a disastrous speed.

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